

ITALY

Sweet Sorrento

Charlotte Metcalf shares her daughter's love of Italy

At the Pompeii ticket kiosk, the most recent article on the wall is a yellowing cutting from the *Sunday Times* dated 2004. It's as if Pompeii's reputation is so assured that no one even bothers describing it any more. I'm a travel editor, and I had not read anything about it recently, nor had I ever been, despite having been mesmerised by teachers' descriptions of Vesuvius erupting and people dying where they stood. But when my six-year-old daughter came home from school asking questions about Romans and volcanoes, I decided we should go.

I was warned that the heat and size of the place would overwhelm a child. But that's to underestimate the skill of the Italians at making children feel at home, while charming their parents. I stood gawping as Fabio, our impossibly handsome guide, squatted to greet her. He showed her the tragically contorted 'frozen' people (plaster casts made from the indentations of bodies, at the moment they met death, preserved in volcanic ash). Fabio kept her riveted, showing her the mosaic of a dog bearing the inscription 'Cave Canem', and explaining how people used to eat at tiny roadside shops. The town was buried in ash when Vesuvius exploded in 79 AD and, without my daughter complaining of tiredness, boredom or heat, I was able to marvel at the excavated amphitheatre, temples and forum, the fresco-adorned houses, market and brothel, and a virtually intact bath-house.

Then it was back to our hotel. Secluded among five acres of orange grove, the Excelsior Vittoria is an oasis off Sorrento's main square. This 19th-century edifice, high on the cliff-top, dominates the harbour like a haughty duchess, still conscious of her aristocratic charms. Inside, the hotel is full of light and airy marble halls with ornate ceilings and billowy curtains at long windows. Our comfortable bedroom was upholstered in sugared-almond colours with delicate antique furniture and walls hand-painted with garlands and flowers. Other than a television and an efficient internet connection, there was zero concession to minimalism or contemporary design.



Above: Italianate splendour — the Excelsior Vittoria enjoys a prime position above Sorrento's harbour; right: Pompeii's famous Cave Canem mosaic



Best of all, you stepped out onto a little balcony and were high above the bay of Naples with a view towards Vesuvius. Though the hotel is almost excruciatingly elegant, there is nothing pompous about it.

Round the bay in the Sant'Agnello quarter is the smaller Cocumella, the oldest hotel on the peninsula and once a favourite with Grand Tour travellers like Goethe, Mary Shelley and Hans Christian Andersen. We ate on a white terrace looking towards the sea over flowering gardens lush with citrus and banana trees, tropical palms and 400-year-old yuccas, and had such good scallop and prawn carpaccio that my daughter begged for more.

There's no modernisation in Sorrento for the sake of it, so the town retains a flavour of timeless glamour, underpinned by superb service. As so much of our own heritage has been gratuitously, often brutally and carelessly, renovated, we Brits are nostalgic for the classic elegance of the Fifties that we imagine Audrey Hepburn and Cary Grant enjoyed.

A private lift creaks down from the Excelsior Vittoria's terrace to the marina, where you catch boats to the islands of Capri, Procida and Ischia. Capri is overcrowded and overpriced, and many of the grand Italians, like Franco Zeffirelli, have fled the tour-

ists, but it remains sensationally beautiful. Trees heavy with big, pale lemons, geraniums and bougainvillea are vivid against whitewashed walls and sun-bleached terracotta. Jasmine-scented lanes wind up towards shady church squares with views over a dazzling sea. The island's oldest taxi, a scarlet vintage stretch Fiat with awning, transported us from port to town. Despite the coaches lurching at us round the hairpin bends, it was hard not to enjoy the ride, listening to the driver's stories of what Coco Chanel or Sophia Loren had got up to in the same caramel leather back seat.

Back in Sorrento, we ate dinner outside in a quiet alley. Though Il Bucco has a Michelin star, the waiter behaved as if my daughter ate in this kind of restaurant every night, and set up a side table to accommodate the three Babar elephants she'd brought along. Afterwards we went to the Cocumella's seafront terrace to see the fireworks that were being launched from the jetty below to celebrate Sant'Agnello's annual Festival of the Sea. The sky popped, whistled and fizzed with colour around us. 'Italy's my favourite country now,' my daughter announced suddenly. 'The people, the food, the hotels, everything's just so lovely!' I couldn't have put it better myself. ☺

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